

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1634

INFO AMCONSUL MELBOURNE

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SUBJ: VICTORIA POWER WORKERS END ELEVEN-WEEK STRIKE

1. EMBASSY FORWARDS HERewith, AS A MATTER OF INTEREST TO WASHINGTON READERS, THE FOLLOWING REPORT ON THE VICTORIA POWER WORKERS' STRIKE PREPARED BY LABATT. I DO NOT RPT NOT CONCUR WITH ANUMBER OF CONCLUSIONS IN THE REPORT. EMBASSY'S COMMENTS ARE ADDED AT THE END OF THIS TELEGRAM.

2. "MELBOURNE 2160

"1. OVER 2000 STATE ELECTRICITY COMMISSION (SEC MAIN-TENANCE WORKERS HELD A MEETING ON OCT 25 AT WHICH THEY VOTED BY A LARGE MAJORITY TO RETURN TO WORK IMMEDIATELY SO AS TO CLEAR THE WAY FOR A FULL-SCALE ARBITRATION COMMISSION "WORK-VALUE" REVIEW OF THEIR BASIC AWARD.

"2. DURING THE REVIEW, WHICH WILL TAKE AT LEAST TWO MONTHS TO COMPLETE, THE COMMISSION WILL CONSIDER UNION AND SEC ARGUMENT FOR AND AGAINST THE PROPOSITION THAT THE VALUE OF THE MAINTENACE WORKERS' CONTRIBUTION TO SEC OPERATIONS HAS INCREASED ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY INTRODUCING A NEW AND MORE FAVORABLE AWARD.

"3. IMPLICIT IN THE STRIKERS' DECISION TO RETURN

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TO WORK WITH NO EXTRA CASH IN HAND WAS THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE "WORK VALUE" REVIEW WILL END WITH A FAVORABLE COMMISSION DECISION WHICH WILL PROVIDE INTER ALIA FOR RETROACTIVE WAGE INCREASES.

"4. LABATT COMMENT: THE STRIDENT AND UNRELENTING ANTI-UNION PROPAGANDA WHICH HIGHLIGHT THE POWER STRIKE HAS MADE IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR OBSERVERS NOT ON THE

SCENE IN THE LATROBE VALLEY TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN FACT AND FANTASY. NEVERTHELESS, THE STRIKE PROVIDES A GOOD EXCUSE FOR TRYING TO PRESENT A MORE BALANCED PICTURE WITH A FEW GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS OF THE SORT WHICH RARELY RECEIVE THE ATTENTION THEY DESERVE. THESE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

"A) THAT DESPITE CONVENTIONAL BELIEFS TO THE CONTRARY, PEOPLE WHO WORK VERY HARD FOR MODEST OR RELATIVELY LOW WAGES RARELY, IF EVER, PARTICIPATE IN OR SUPPORT LONG STRIKES FOR FRIVOLOUS OR IDEOLOGICAL REASONS.

"B) THAT THERE ARE TIMES (AND HISTORY - INCLUDING U.S. AND AUSTRALIAN HISTORY - IS REplete WITH EXAMPLES) WHEN THE ONLY SELF-RESPECTING WAY TO GO ABOUT EXTRACTING JUSTICE OR EVEN ATTENTION FROM INFLEXIBLE OR INSENSITIVE ORGANIZATIONS OR SYSTEMS IS BY RESORTING TO EXTREME OR UNUSUAL MEASURES (SUCH AS DISRUPTIVE STRIKES).

"C) THAT PRIMITIVE AND PROSCRIPTIVE LAWS ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR "GOOD FAITH" BARGAINING IF ONE'S GOAL IS TO RESOLVE (RATHER THAN EXACERBATE) SERIOUS INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES.

"D) THAT ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL REASONS COMMUNISTS AND OTHER LEFT-WING MILITANTS SOMETIMES DO WELL IN NON-COMMUNIST POLITICAL AND INDUSTRIAL ENVIRONMENTS IS BECAUSE THEY MAKE SURE THEY ARE IN THE FOREFRONT OF THOSE WHO AT LEAST APPEAR TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE PLIGHT OF THE LITTLE MAN.

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"E) THAT, REGARDLESS OF THE ISSUES INVOLVED IN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES, THE FRASER GOVT NEVER TAKES THE SIDE OF AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS WHO ARE TRADE UNIONISTS AGAINST THOSE WHO ARE EMPLOYERS. OR, TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, THAT THE FRASER GOVT CLEARLY BELIEVES THE MOST APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR THE FEDERAL GOVT TO PLAY IN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES IS A PRO-EMPLOYER ADVERSARY ROLE.

"F) THAT THE FEDERAL AND VICTORIAN GOVTS, THE SEC, AND THE ARBITRATION COMMISSION BEAR AT LEAST AS MUCH OF THE BLAME AND RESPONSIBILITY AS THE UNIONS AND THE STRIKERS FOR ONE OF THE MOST COSTLY AND DISRUPTIVE STRIKES IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN HISTORY IF ONLY BECAUSE THEY HAD THE MEANS AT THEIR DISPOSAL TO SETTLE THE DISPUTE ALONG THE LINES OF THE INTERIM SETTLEMENT THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE 11-WEEK COURSE OF THE STRIKE. THE FACT THAT THEY CHOSE NOT TO EMPLOY THEM WHILE FRONT PAGE HEADLINES AND LEAD EDITORIALS WERE DAILY BLAMING "GREEDY" AND "IRRESPONSIBLE" STRIKERS FOR DESTROYING THE VICTORIAN ECONOMY RAISES SERIOUS QUESTION ABOUT THE IMPARTIALITY AND VIABILITY OF AUSTRALIA'S ARBITRATION-BASED INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEMS IN TIMES OF UNUSUAL STRESS. CURRAN."

3. EMBASSY COMMENT:

A) IT IS TRUE, AS LABATT NOTES, THAT PEOPLE WHO WORK VERY HARD FOR MODEST OR RELATIVELY LOW WAGES RARELY PARTICIPATE IN OR SUPPORT LONG STRIKES FOR FRIVOLOUS OR IDEOLOGICAL REASONS. IT IS ESPECIALLY TRUE, AS HE NOTED EARLIER, THAT THE TEMPER WHICH WERE AROUSED BY THE LATROBE VALLEY STRIKE MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH FACT FROM FICTION. WHETHER BY IDEOLOGICAL BIAS OR SHEER PREJUDICE, PRESS REPORTING ON THE LATROBE VALLEY STRIKE HAS BEEN SO UNANIMOUSLY AGAINST THE STRIKE LEADERSHIP THAT IT IS DIFFICULT FOR ANYONE NOT ACTUALLY ON THE SCENE TO GET A FEEL FOR ITS ATMOSPHERE. BUT IT WOULD BE MISLEADING TO DEROGATE THE IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE DISPUTE: NOT ONLY ARE THE SEC WORKERS NOT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RPT NOT PAID "MODEST OR RELATIVELY LOW WAGES" -- THEIR WAGES ARE SUFFICIENTLY HIGH THAT THE ARBITRATION AND CONCILIATION COMMISSION (THE THEORETICALLY IMPARTIAL GROUP WHICH HAS BECOME AUSTRALIA'S PRINCIPAL LABOR DISPUTE-RESOLVING

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BODY) DECLINED TO GIVE THE STRIKE LEADERSHIP THE ADDITIONAL \$40 PER WEEK IT SOUGHT. WHEN, AS PART OF THE MEDIATION EFFORT, THE ARBITRATION COMMISSION WAS PERSUADED TO REVIEW ITS AWARD, IT DID SO AND REAFFIRMED ITS

ORIGINAL DECISION AGAINST THE WAGE INCREASE. (AS A PRACTICAL MATTER, THE MAJORITY OF SEC WORKERS ON STRIKE EARN SOMEWHERE IN THE \$160-180 PER WEEK RPT WEEK RANGE, NOT COUNTING ADD-ONS.) WITH RESPECT TO IDEOLOGY, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE LEADER OF THE STRIKE, SAMMY ARMSTRONG, IS AN OPENLY-ADMITTED MILITANT COMMUNIST (THAT IS, A FULL, DUES-PAYING, CARD-CARRYING MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA), AS ARE HIS TWO PRINCIPAL ASSISTANTS. THE COMMUNISTS HAVE MADE SUCH USE AS THEY CAN OF THE STRIKE, ALTHOUGH NATIONALLY-PROMINENT COMMUNIST TRADE UNION LEADERS SUCH AS JOHN HALFPENNY MUST HAVE HAD SOME SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT POSSIBLE DAMAGE TO COMMUNIST STANDING THROUGH ASSOCIATION WITH WHAT HAS BEEN A PATENTLY INDEFENSIBLE AND UNSUPPORTABLE STRIKE BY THE SEC WORKERS IN LATROBE VALLEY.

B) WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT SOMETIMES THE ONLY WAY TO REMEDY INJUSTICE OR INSENSITIVITY BY ORGANIZATIONS OR SYSTEMS IS BY RESORTING TO EXTREME MEASURES, THAT HAS NOT RPT NOT BEEN THE CASE IN THE LATROBE VALLEY DISPUTE. LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THERE IS AN ARBITRATION AND CONCILIATION SYSTEM, SET UP PRECISELY TO RESOLVE THIS SORT OF INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE, WHOSE WORKING WAS TWICE REJECTED OUT-OF-HAND BY THE COMMUNIST-LED MILITANTS AMONG THE LATROBE VALLEY UNION LEADERSHIP. BOB HAWKE, PRESIDENT OF THE ACTU (AND AUSTRALIAN LABOR'S MOST RENOWNED "CONCILIATOR") ENTERED THE DISPUTE AT THE REQUEST OF BOTH THE VICTORIA STATE GOVERNMENT AND THE ARBITRATION COMMISSION, AND HIS RECOMMENDATIONS WERE REJECTED BY THE COMMUNIST-LED MILITANTS. BY THE END OF THE 11-WEEK STRIKE, SUCH "INFLEXIBILITY AND INSENSITIVITY" AS HAD BEEN SHOWN WAS COMING MORE FROM THE STRIKE LEADERS (WHO APPEARED TO HAVE FOUND THEIR PRINCIPLE -- THAT THEY HAD BEEN ON STRIKE FOR ELEVEN WEEKS OVER A \$40 PER WEEK WAGE INCREASE, AND THEY DIDN'T THINK THEY COULD GO BACK TO WORK WITHOUT LOSING FACE UNLESS THEY GOT IT) THAN FROM EMPLOYERS. THE STRIKERS HAVE NOW BEEN PERSUADED TO GO BACK WITHOUT THEIR \$40 PER WEEK BY THE CRUSHING LACK OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THEIR POSITION, THE OVERWHELMING REACTION OF THE PEOPLE OF VICTORIA AGAINST THEM, THE FINALLY-UNIFIED STANDS OF THE VICTORIA AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS, AND THE UTTER FAILURE OF EITHER ACTU PRESIDENT HAWKE, OR THE ACTU AS AN ORGANIZATION, OR THE ARBITRATION COMMISSION AS A BODY, TO SUPPORT THEIR CLAIMS.

C) IT IS TRUE BEYOND QUESTION THAT PRIMITIVE AND PROSCRIPTIVE LAWS ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR "GOOD FAITH" BARGAINING IF ONE'S GOALS ARE TO RESOLVE (RATHER THAN EXACERBATE) SERIOUS INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES. AND IT IS FURTHER TRUE, AS LABATT IMPLIES, THAT "GOOD FAITH" BARGAINING

CANNOT REALLY BE SAID TO BE PARTICULARLY WIDESPREAD IN AUSTRALIAN LABOR PRACTICES, FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS WHICH ARE OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF THIS COMMENTARY. WHAT HAS SHONE BRILLIANTLY THROUGH THE LATROBE VALLEY AND OTHER MAJOR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RECENT AUSTRALIAN LABOR DISPUTES IS THE CONTEMPT WITH WHICH A SEGMENT (BUT NOT BY ANY MEANS ALL -- OR EVEN NECESSARILY A MAJORITY) OF AUSTRALIAN LABOR UNION LEADERSHIP REJECTS "ARBITRATION AND CONCILIATION" ON THE IDEOLOGICAL GROUNDS THAT ANYTHING LESS THAN COMPLETE CAPITULATION TO ITS DEMANDS IS A VICTORY, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, FOR "MANAGEMENT" (OR "CAPITALISM", OR "THE BOSSES", OR EVEN MORE PEJORATIVE TERMS). THE MILITANTS AMONG THE RADICAL COMMUNIST UNION LEADERS SIMPLY REJECT THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPROMISE WHICH, BY DEFINITION, ARE THE ELEMENTS OF "GOOD FAITH" BARGAINING AS WE KNOW IT IN THE UNITED STATES. THERE IS A FURTHER RADICAL IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING AMONG MILITANT COMMUNIST UNION LEADERS -- THE SEARCH FOR A MEANS OF DESTROYING "CAPITALISM", IN WHICH IT INCLUDES VESTIGES OF SOCIALISM: FAR FROM BEING OWNED BY PRIVATE ENTERPRISE ""THE CAPITALIST PIGS", AS THE MILITANTS MIGH HAVE IT), THE SEC IS OWNED BY THE STATE OF VICTORIA, AND THUS, BY DEFINITION, IS THE PROPERTY OF "THE PEOPLE" AND PRESUMABLY RESPONSIVE TO THEIR NEEDS.

D) THAT "ONE OF THE REASONS COMMUNISTS AND OTHER LEFT-WING MILITANTS SOMETIMES DO WELL IN POLITICAL AND INDUSTRIAL ENVIRONMENTS" IS THAT THEY APPEAR TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT "THE LITTLE MAN" IS BOTH TRUE AND A TRUISM.

E) THE STATEMENT "THE FRASER GOVT NEVER TAKES THE SIDE OF AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS WHO ARE TRADE UNIONISTS AGAINST THOSE WHO ARE EMPLOYERS, OR, TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, THE FRASER GOVT CLEARLY BELIEVES THE MOST APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR THE FEDERAL GOVT TO PLAY IN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES IS A PRO-EMPLOYER ADVERSARY ROLE" IS SUFFICIENTLY TENDENTIOUS TO MAKE REFUTATION A BIT UNNECESSARY. IT IS WORTH, HOWEVER, NOTING MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT STREET'S COMMENT IN PARLIAMENT DURING THE DEBATE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S LABOR DISPUTES BILL ON OCTOBER 19TH:

"A VERY REAL DANGER ARISES WHEN A UNION, IN PURSUIT OF SOME LIMITED OR SELF-INTERESTED GOAL, IS ABLE TO IMPOSE CONSIDERABLE ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND DISLOCATION ON THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY. OVER THE PAST YEAR WE HAVE EXPERIENCED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE CRIPPLING EFFECT OF STRIKES...AND ARE WITNESSING TODAY THE FRIGHTENING CAPACITY OF A RELATIVELY SMALL

GROUP OF UNIONISTS IN THE VICTORIAN POWER INDUSTRY TO
WREAK HAVOC ON AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY. SUCH SITUATIONS

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DEMAND THAT ACTION BE TAKEN. IT IS PARAMOUNT THAT UNIONS
RECOGNIZE THEIR OBLIGATIONS AND THE LEGITIMATE INTERESTS
OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE AS A WHOLE."

IF IT IS TRUE THAT THE ELECTRIC COMPANY SHOULD NOT HAVE
THE RIGHT TO CUT OFF POWER TO AN ENTIRE STATE BECAUSE THEY
HAVE BEEN DENIED AN INCREASE IN POWER RATES, SO TOO THERE
IS A DEVELOPING CONSENSUS IN AUSTRALIA THAT UNIONS SHOULD
NOT HAVE THE UNRESTRICTED RIGHT TO SHUT OFF POWER TO AN
ENTIRE STATE WHEN THEY HAVE BEEN DENIED A WAGE INCREASE--
WHEN THEIR DISPUTE HAS BEEN SUBMITTED TO THE ARBITRATION
MECHANISM AND BEEN TURNED DOWN, BEEN RESUBMITTED AND TURNED
DOWN AGAIN, HAD THE NATIONAL ACTU PRESIDENT RECOMMEND TERMS
FOR SETTLEMENT AND TURNED HIM DOWN AS WELL*

F) FINALLY, IN LIGHT OF THE ABOVE, IT CAN HARDLY BE
SAID THAT THE FEDERAL AND VICTORIA GOVERNMENTS, THE SEC,
AND THE ARBITRATION COMMISSION FAILED TO USE THE MEANS AT
THEIR DISPOSAL TO RESOLVE THIS PARTICULAR DISPUTE, SINCE
EVERY RECOURSE (SHORT OF COMPLETE CAPITULATION TO THE
UNIONS' DEMANDS) WAS TRIED -- IN FUTILITY BECAUSE ARMSTRONG
AND HIS CLIQUE CHOSE TO USE THIS STRIKE AS A TEST OF MANHOOD.
THE AUSTRALIAN BODY POLITIC IS NOT GENERALLY UNSYMPATHETIC
TO UNION AND WORKER NEEDS, ESPECIALLY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE
INFLATION THIS COUNTRY HAS EXPERIENCED OVER THE PAST SEVERAL
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YEARS. THAT THE LATROBE VALLYE DISPUTE VERY QUICKLY LOST,
ALMOST COMPLETELY, WHATEVER SHRED OF PUBLIC SYMPATHY IT MIGHT
HAVE HAD (DISREGARDING COMPLETELY THE MEDIA, SINCE THEY ARE
PRESUMED TO BE BIASED ANYWAY...), IS CERTAINLY AT LEAST
CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE THAT THE MILITANTLY COMMUNIST
LEADERSHIP OF THE LATROBE VALLEY STRIKE FAILED TO PER-
SUADE ANYONE OTHER THAN THEMSELVES THAT THEY HAD A CAUSE.
THEIR ONLY VICTORY, IN FACT, MAY TURN OUT TO BE THE PER-
VERSE ONE OF PROVOKING THE BACKLASH THEY PERHPAS HOPED
TO EVOKE -- PRESUMABLY PROVING THAT SOCIETY IS REAC-
TIONARY AND 'IPSO FACTO' AGAINST THE WORKING CLASS. IF
THAT WAS SAMMY ARMSTRONG'S HOPE, HE CERTAINLY CAME PRETTY
CLOSE TO BRINGING THE LATTER PART OF IT ABOUT.
ALSTON

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